DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 518 **FL 010 088**

TITLE	Middle School Exploratory Foreign Language Programs: A Position Paper.
INSTITUTION	National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Language.
PUB DATE	Oct 77
NOTE	11p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Bound Students; Communicative Competence (Languages); Conversational Language Courses; *Cultural Awareness; *Instructional Innovation; Junior High Schools; *Language Programs; *Language Role; *Linguistic Performance; Low Achievers; Middle Schools; Noncollege Preparatory Students; Secondary Education; *Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

Four types of exploratory foreign language programs are described: (1) the language overview course, (2) the trial-study course, (3) the Level I offering, and (4) the course for the non-college bound. It is largely in the middle schools (grades 6-8) and junior high schools (grades 7-9) that exploratory programs are being used. The language overview course is designed to increase or to develop student linguistic awareness through an educational experience in the basic social phenomenon of language. Approaches to language overview courses are the linguistic-centered approach, an approach that samples several language families, and the Esperanto approach. The trial-study language course provides a linguistic and cultural experience that permits the student to sample language study prior to registering for a regular sequence course. The level I middle grade offering is the first phase of second language learning. Two types of foreign language course for the non-college bound student are the conversational, cultural approach that minimizes written and grammar areas and the program for the very low achiever. (SW)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL EXPLORATORY FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

A Position Paper

National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages

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FL010088

October 1977

INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s particular attention was given to the implementation of foreign language courses in the middle and elementary grades. These programs were designed either to provide or to supplement the introduction and the early learning phases of high school programs. The profile of success was very uneven. As a result there arose divergent points of view regarding both the advisability of such programs and their optimum structures. The early 1970s witnessed both the reduction and the expansion of the elementary grades of FLES (foreign language in the elementary school) programs whose objectives are now generally regarded as early second language learning.*

Today, it is largely in the middle schools (Grades 6-8) and junior high schools (Grades 7-9) that so-called "exploratory" programs are currently being tested, implemented, or dropped according to their perceived effectiveness. If successful formulae for development and implementation of exploratory programs in foreign language can be established, they may become a standard component of foreign language curriculum in the 1980s.

DEFINITION

An exploratory foreign language course is one designed to allow students to experience some area of foreign language study for the purpose of acquainting them with the phenomenon of language itself, to

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*Aspects of bilingual education K-Grade 5 and beyond are not included since they are beyond the scope of this paper.

determine students' interest and potential in further foreign language study, or to meet some special student need. Such a course may vary in length from six weeks to one semester or one year, depending on the specific goals of the course and the local scheduling structure. The course may be offered as an elective or as one of a number of required exploratory experiences.

EXPLORATORY COURSE FORMATS

The content of an exploratory foreign language course will follow one of several general patterns outlined below.

The Language Overview Course

The purpose of the language overview course is to increase or to develop student linguistic awareness through an educational experience in the basic social phenomenon of language. In addition, such a course can serve to provide a general perspective or a first step in the study of a specific language.

One type of language overview is the linguistic-centered approach. It focuses on the description of the language families including the principles of language change, on sound systems including intonation, on structure and writing systems, and on lexicon including regionalisms and gestures. Basic problems in implementing the linguistic-centered course are those of first selecting from the broad field of linguistics the kind of content that will interest middle school students and then designing a course that will not be purely informational or fact-stuffing. An allied problem is that of finding a teacher well enough trained in the subject matter to structure a suitable course.

A second approach to the language overview course is to sample from several language families. The broad culture basis and the novelty of the less common languages constitute a unique appeal that attracts a number of students. The course lends itself to an experiential design and is best presented in a combination of conversational language learning and everyday culture. Time spent on any one language can vary according to class interest or perceived relevance. One hindrance to the implementation of this kind of course is insufficient teacher expertise, since few individuals are expert in a dozen languages. Readily available guides of helpful teaching materials with the basic conversational phrases are essential to avoid problems such as overemphasis on the languages of the teacher's own expertise to the neglect of others. An uneven presentation can create a degree of confusion about those languages touched on too fleetingly. It is important that the evaluation instruments be suitable to the nature of the subject matter, stressing performance and participation rather than fact recall.

A third type is the Experanto approach. Advocates of Experanto--an artificial international language--claim that as an exploratory course its more regularized grammar permits greater coverage within the given time, minimizes the demands on the teacher, offers exposure to many cultures, and provides transfer learning to other languages. However, its critics point out the scarcity of trained teachers, the resistance by parents and administrators to noncontinuous programs, and the nonapplicability of Esperanto for stu-

dents' choosing their subsequent language study. In addition, the usefulness of Esperanto itself is questioned.

The Trial-Study Language Course

This type of course provides a linguistic and cultural experience that permits the student to sample language study prior to registering for a regular sequence course and, as such, offers several definite advantages. When introduced at the middle school level, the course can capitalize on the enthusiasm and the language aptitude that characterize that age group, consequently encouraging further language study; it can also introduce ideas of cultural diversity at a crucial period in the middle school student's social development. Introduced at the middle school, it can both broaden the base of the number of students exposed to foreign language and combat the elitism and arbitrary prerequisites, such as "all B's in English," too often associated with foreign language study. Also, by beginning an exploratory course in the middle grades and following it up with regular sequence offerings, a longer overall sequence can be offered.

The trial-study course also gives students a basis on which to make a judgment about whether or not they can and want to continue foreign language study. Where multiple language offerings are available in high school, this exploratory course can afford a chance to choose which language is most compatible to individual interests and needs.

This kind of course should immediately precede the opportunity to

enroll in the regular sequence course. The course must be so structured as to insure that the sampling is valid; otherwise, the offering becomes counterproductive. The course should be taught by teachers who give the regular sequence or by teachers who work closely with the regular course teachers. If the course is comprised of more than one language sample, the samples should be fairly consistent from language to language so that the student can choose which language best suits him, not which segment was the most fun. The sample should also reflect accurately the kind of sequence course that is taught locally. A "fun and games" sample that leads into a heavily academic, college-oriented course will result in resentment and disillusionment on the part of students, a resentment that will have repercussions not only on their attitudes in middle school but in high school and college as well. Similarly, the traditional, grammatical approach which permeates many senior high school programs is even more detrimental at earlier ages and may create negative attitudes about foreign language study that can persist well beyond the middle grades. If the exploratory course is to be offered to a large number of students, including those who may decide not to continue with the languages, it should also constitute a self-contained educational experience regardless of subsequent study.

Fundamental to this kind of course, then, is an awareness by students, parents, and teachers of the very special objectives of its content which should offer all students a learning experience, provide a true sample of foreign language learning, and create a

positive attitude toward the field of foreign language.

The Level I Middle Grade Offering

This kind of course can be considered exploratory only in that all middle school courses can be considered explorations of the content awaiting them in high school. Actually, this type of course is more accurately described as the first phase of second language learning.

Some foreign language educators favor the Level I course over the trial-study course in the middle grades; they point out that it better facilitates a longer sequence of overall language study and does not waste students' time. They claim that in most cases students have already made up their minds about what to take or the curriculum opportunities do not permit real choice. In addition, they maintain that beginning Level I at this stage capitalizes more efficiently on the enthusiasm and ability of the middle school student and gives him or her a more realistic view of foreign language study.

It should be noted, however, that the implementation of Level I at the middle school level creates certain problems. Usually it is easier for a middle school administrator to staff a short-term exploratory course than a two-year Level I sequence. Also, more students are willing to try a short-term course. The problems arising from Level I articulation with the senior high school program can be critical, compounding the problems of the poorly structured exploratory course in terms of student expectations and level of achievement. If the Level I course at middle school is

too easy, or if it concentrates, for example, on oral skills in direct contradiction to the thrust of the high school program, students become resentful, teachers become exasperated, and serious community problems can arise. On the other hand, the exclusivist, college-orientation of any course of study designed for middle grades not only results in high attrition but also fails to take into consideration the changing nature of the student and his particular academic abilities at this point in his development. In addition, it can create negative attitudes that persist into high school, college, and, in some cases, well into adult and parental life.

Foreign Language for the Noncollege Bound

A fourth kind of exploratory course has appeared in recent years, particularly in areas where the character of the school population has changed. This foreign language course is designed for the student who does not plan to go to college. While the course may motivate some students to enter regular sequence programs, this is not its primary purpose. Such programs place heavy emphasis on teaching contemporary culture and conversational language skills. It is fundamental to all such courses that their content, scope, and evaluative instruments be adapted to the specific needs and goals of the group to be served.

The most frequent noncollege course is the conversational, cultural approach that minimizes written and grammar areas and is a self-contained one- or two-semester course. Different texts and dif-

ferent situation-vocabulary emphasis, with a different and much greater proportion of contemporary culture emphasis, are basic ingredients for this kind of course. Common problems arise from an attempt to make it an alternate path to the sequence course or from a lack of adequate curriculum structure.

Another type of noncollege course that has begun to appear in recent years is the program for the very low achiever. In view of the Minnesota 1974 self-study report which takes note of the high correlation between success in foreign language and self-image building, this type of course can play a unique role. Typically, it focuses on simple conversational phrases, is completely oral, includes cultural activities, and is paced appropriately for the low achiever. An accepting, flexible attitude on the part of the teacher regarding achievement and curriculum content is also needed. One problem with this kind of course can be over-registration of students by counselors eager to find classes for the low achiever; to be successful, class size should be limited to 15.

CONCLUSION

There are four general categories of exploratory programs being implemented in schools in the 1970s: the language overview course, the trial-study course, the Level I offering, and the course for the noncollege bound. It is the position of the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Language that these are all valid exploratory programs if planned and implemented in such a way that their inherent problems are avoided and their goals are the ones best suited to local needs, resources, and interests. For example,

will the institution of an Esperanto course be inappropriate for certain school districts because it is rarely useful? Can the goals of the trial-study course be better achieved through a single language exposure rather than through small samples of several languages, at the same time providing a valid self-contained educational experience? Is the noncollege-bound course the most appropriate for the particular student population? Exploratory language programs must be chosen so as to 1) maximize their potential, 2) avoid their identified pitfalls, and 3) focus clearly on the specific goals of the particular type of exploratory course.